

Special Feature Essay: The Killer Angels: 30th Anniversary Edition

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Review

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Shaara, Michael *SPECIAL FEATURE ESSAY: The Killer Angels: 30th Anniversary Edition*. Random House, \$21.95 ISBN 679643249

The last American epic

Reflections on the Shaara trilogy

*This year marks the 30th anniversary of the publication of Michl Shaara's **The Killer Angels**, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel which was the basis for Ron Maxwell's film *Gettysburg* (1993). In conjunction with Random House's release of its commemorative edition of the book, David Madden examines how Michl and Jeff Shaara's trilogy can appropriately be called an American epic.*

Young Jeff first saw *Gettysburg* when his father took the family on a visit to the battlefield in 1966. Four years later, Jeff, then eighteen, helped his somewhat frail father as he walked Gettysburg battlefield in the early 1970s, researching a Civil War novel. Out of such little moments, our great literary and cinematic epic depiction of the American Civil War began. We may imagine Homer's father taking him over the battlefield at Troy, actually or orally. A major difference is that both father and son are authors of the epic Civil War literary trilogy.

The author was Michl Shaara and the novel was **The Killer Angels**, which won the Pulitzer Prize for 1974. Writer-director Ronald Maxwell's highly successful, now classic movie adaptation, *Gettysburg* appeared in 1994, six years after Shaara's death, and stimulated sales of the novel to over two million copies. Maxwell became a kind of father-figure for Jeff, encouraging the young rare coin dealer to write a prequel to his father's famous novel. Only two years after the movie *Gettysburg* appeared, Jeff Shaara's **Gods and Generals** was published; he tells the story of the same generals over a five year period before their separate, parallel paths converged on Gettysburg. Ironically, it was an immediate bestseller and work on the film began only three years after publication.

Publication of **Gods and Generals** is a unique event in the history of American literature. Never before has the child of a prize-winning writer published a novel on the same subject, featuring the same characters. Furthermore, what we have here is a very interesting reversal: the son does not take up the story where the father left off; he goes back to 1858 to throw the lines of the narrative forward to the point where the father's novel began.

This question arose immediately: Do the son's boots fit the father's footprints? If brute curiosity is a crude motive, I am glad to report that it is here well-satisfied on a high plane. In every sense, even when compared with the father's celebrated work, the son's uncommon skill has produced a Civil War novel that stands out among all others. Therefore, to paraphrase Mark Twain, Persons attempting to find exploitation in this literary event will be shot.

In **Gods and Generals**, Jeff Shaara does indeed deal with mythic figures--Lee and Jackson--but he also deals with lower ranking officers, such as Chamberlain, who were led by generals. With the national consciousness of the father, the son presents the war from both sides (the Shaaras are from New Jersey and lived in Florida). As in **The Killer Angels**, the chapters of **Gods and Generals** bear the names of the historical figures, two southern and two northern, on whom Jeff Shaara concentrates: Generals Lee and Jackson and Hancock and Colonel Chamberlain. Shaara alternates among characters, drawing the reader into the novel's 58 chapters, first through Lee's perspective. The focus falls less frequently on Chamberlain and Hancock than on Lee and Jackson. Now and then, other characters, northern and southern, are favored: Jeb Stuart, Oliver Howard, and William Barksdale. Each man marches on parallel lines with the others toward the explosive convergence at the obscure little crossroads town of Gettysburg. Most of the novel is devoted to the major battles in Virginia and Maryland that preceded the march into the North. A narrative this complex would be a risky venture for any first-time novelist.

Because the son's novel stands on its own feet, not on the father's shoulders, comparisons by no means prove odious. The son has a greater conceptual power than his father had. His narrative covers more time and space, with a pace that begins in a meditative mode and gradually achieves a marching cadence. There are more long stretches of sustained narrative and more variety in the dramatic scenes; they are more fully developed, and the dialogue is more natural. Jeff Shaara gives us access, as his father did, to the subjective experiences of his

characters, but with greater brevity. And the sequences in which all those elements are represented are more skillfully controlled. **God and Generals** is more truly epic in scope than **The Killer Angels**.

The Killer Angels opened an enormous door for me, the son tells us in his acknowledgements, allowed my apprehensions to be set aside, and brought forth the first words of this book. [My father's] greatest wish, what drove him through a difficult career all his life, was the desire to leave something behind, a legacy to be remembered. Dad, you succeeded.

Shaara has said that in writing **Gods and Generals**, he discovered his true vocation, and that in General Grant (hero of **The Last Full Measure**) he discovered his own special subject, one that put his new vocation as a writer to the test. I loved writing about that man. I wanted to shatter the myths about him and tell his story fully and truthfully. I liked being able to bring out the differences between Lee and Grant. People are emotional about Lee, a beloved figure, an inspiring figure. But Grant is cool and aloof, so I wanted to bring him alive for the reader. Writing about him was a little like writing about Stonewall Jackson in **Gods and Generals**--exciting, discovering the man as I tried to recreate him as a real person, not just an awesome legend. Both men were hard to get close to in life. Reading **The Last Full Measure**, I was struck with certain parallels: Just as Grant developed his talent in the Mississippi Campaign, the young novelist developed his talent while writing about Grant after that campaign; and both President Lincoln and Jeff Shaara found their man in Grant.

Of all the heroes in the trilogy, Shaara felt two men were most like his father as a man and as a writer pursuing his vocation. As a man, my father was most like Joshua Chamberlain. I think my father felt an affinity with him. My father was idealistic (although he became a cynic in his later years), an intellectual, a scholarly kind of man, like Chamberlain. Until his father wrote about him in **The Killer Angels**, the general public knew little about Chamberlain; he lifted Chamberlain from obscurity into almost mythic status in the American consciousness; he continues to play an important role in Jeff Shaara's two novels in the trilogy. And then the other side of my father that I was quite aware of as I wrote comes out in General Hancock. Hancock is very good at what he does. After Reynolds died, he was perhaps the greatest Union general in the field. Like Hancock, my father had no patience with incompetence, stupidity, inefficiency. You know that scene in the newspaper office when Hancock reaches across the desk and grabs the newspaperman by the throat? I felt my father guiding me as I

wrote that scene. And he felt that the only way he could describe that murderous battle of the Wilderness was through someone who was there in the thick of the smoke and the fire. But describing Hancock wounded, suffering, I knew that scene was my farewell to my father.

Like both Shaaras, Ulysses S. Grant is a great stylist, which is partly why Hemingway declared Grant's autobiography to be one of the masterpieces of American literature. As he wrote from Grant's point of view in **The Last Full Measure**, Grant's style influenced Jeff Shaara's own. I tried to catch the simplicity and the flow of Grant's style when writing inside Grant's mind and I worked to change my style to be more appropriate to Lee when writing from his point of view. Although his style is similar to his father's, Jeff Shaara has forged his own distinctive style. Lee nodded, wanted to say more, to break away from the thoughts of Jackson, but the image was still there, would not go. Lee turned back toward the march of the men, felt the wetness again.

Jeff Shaara continues to use his father's background and structuring devices. I wanted all three novels to have the same basic features. But in **The Last Full Measure**, I see a difference in his handling of the structure. As omniscient author, he goes into fewer minds than he and his father did in the first two novels--mostly from Lee's to Grant's to Chamberlain's. He consciously worked at creating that difference. I agonized over that. I worried that there might be an imbalance between Union and Confederate points of view, but I really couldn't think of a Southern general of great enough stature or interest for me or the reader. Longstreet gets wounded and is no longer of use to Lee. Stuart gets killed. I go into their minds once only to show that everybody is fading out, leaving Lee alone. It's subtler in General Gordon's one chapter because he can see, as Lee cannot, the futility of opposing Grant. One by one, all the great generals go--Jackson is already dead--and Lee misses each of them. So of the Confederate generals, I decided to show Lee's mind isolated. Lee who was the symbol of the whole war, of the whole Confederacy, is out there by himself, facing Grant.

Jeff Shaara handles that point of view structure much more effectively now. Although he devotes a few more chapters to Grant and Chamberlain than to Lee, it's important to stress that he sustains a major achievement that distinguishes this father-son trilogy from most other Civil War novels: he gives the American public a balanced experience of the temperament, sensibility, character, and convictions of generals on both sides of the battle lines. Ideally, the Homeric Civil War epic that Americans have longed for depicts both sides evenhandedly

and compassionately, encompasses major battles led by major leaders, and appeals to all readers, North and South, young and old, men and women. The trilogy begun by the father and finished by the son is that epic.

Shaara intentionally juxtaposes Lee's mind to Grant's most often and most consistently to show contrasts between them and to make Chamberlain's contrast with both Grant and Lee. And Chamberlain is there also because I wanted to continue to tell his story. He's such a wonderful and unique character. And I was continuing my father's original focus on Chamberlain, taking him beyond Gettysburg. Half-way through the novel, I realized that one great effect of giving the reader deeper insights into Grant is that Shaara provides, by the method of contrast, a much clearer sense of who Lee is, and Lee, in turn, illuminates Grant. The juxtaposition of Lee to Grant also enables us to feel the sting of irony, as when Grant at Cold Harbor thinks, There is no one to blame but me, and the reader recalls Lee thinking at Gettysburg, It's all my fault.

The scenes between Mark Twain and Grant at the end of the novel are so appealing and moving one can imagine a play dramatizing their relationship. When I learned that Twain commissioned Grant to write his autobiography I was ecstatic. Twain is such a public icon, he's worked into Westerns, even science fiction movies as a character. The parallel between Twain and Grant talking together with Huck and Jim on a raft on the Mississippi River rings true to me.

The question originally was, Can Jeff Shaara's **Gods and Generals** possibly be as good as his father's **The Killer Angels**. My answer was, Better. The haunting question since then has been, Was **Gods and Generals** merely a high level act of filial mimicry? My own answer is a resounding, No, and my evidence is **The Last Full Measure**. But some people who admired **Gods and Generals** worried that it might be just a fluke. So, Shaara has said, did I. Shaara proves once and for all that, though influenced by his father, he has a voice and talent all his own. The two million readers who revere the father's novel now have to contend with the praise of those who read the son's first. I recommend turning to the son's depiction of pre-Gettysburg events before reading the father's rendering of the battle. Both experiences will prove memorable, and perhaps inseparable. Jeff Shaara's **The Last Full Measure** brought this unique and monumental father-son trilogy to a triumphant conclusion. On the threshold of the new Millennium, the Shaara vision of its origins in blood and courage illuminated America's future.

In the three novels, the focus is divided equally between North and South, but because of the nature of movies, Ron Maxwell's plan had to be somewhat different: *Gettysburg* focuses on North and South equally, *Gods and Generals* focuses on Generals Lee and Jackson, and *The Last Full Measure*, if produced, would focus on General Grant. Because the third movie in the trilogy has not been created, most people are unaware of the overall balanced perspective and a controversy has arisen over the seemingly sympathetic view of the Confederacy in the movie version of *Gods and Generals*. Equal focus on North and South was relatively easy in *Gettysburg* because the battle took place in a single small town in only two days. But because it takes place over several years and several battles, *Gods and Generals* had to focus upon a single hero, General Stonewall Jackson. Even with that focus, shifts to Chamberlain on the Union side slows the character-based narrative pace. Not even excepting Grant and Sherman, the two generals in whom there has always been the greatest interest, not only in both the North and the South but around the world, are Lee and Jackson. Given the danger of shattering the focus, cinematically that is imperative enough for concentrating on them. The unfortunate result is the unfair accusation that *Gods and Generals* is pro-Southern, and, in the minds of quite a few number of critics and viewers, therefore Neo-Confederate, but not, one hopes, pro-slavery. As scriptwriter and director, Maxwell enables Chamberlain to attack slavery and even has Jackson wish freedom for his black cook. Moviegoers who view the Confederacy as evil, might concede that it is in the nature of drama in all genres that the more colorful character steals the show and seems at moments to skew its meaning, the classic instance being John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, which sets out to justify the ways of God to man, and in which the risen son of God cannot compete for our interest with the fallen angel, Lucifer. In Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*, heroes on both sides are flawed.

Homer avoided the serious risk of immersing the reader in too many battles and too many characters by compressing the ten year war of many battles into a single battle and one clear cut hero on each side, as Ron Maxwell is able to do in *Gettysburg*. But the actual nature of the American Civil War--many officers and men in many battles on many different battlefields--and Jeff Shaara's novelistic conception for **Gods and Generals** gave Maxwell a scriptwriter-director's cinematic nightmare in which his choices were dictated and limited. The battles (minus Antietam on the cutting room floor) are among the most powerful ever filmed. And the focus on Jackson, enhanced by Lee's hovering presence, gives the viewer one of the most moving death scenes in recent memory. If we do not

quite have a blind Homer in the combined novels of father and son, in the films we have a Homeric vision that is uncannily clear. The novel trilogy and the movies are true examples of epics. * * *

Given that this is the age of interdisciplinary studies, one may wonder why historians are perceived by some to have a lock on the Civil War. In the general public's experience, however, it is not the historian who dominates the subject, but